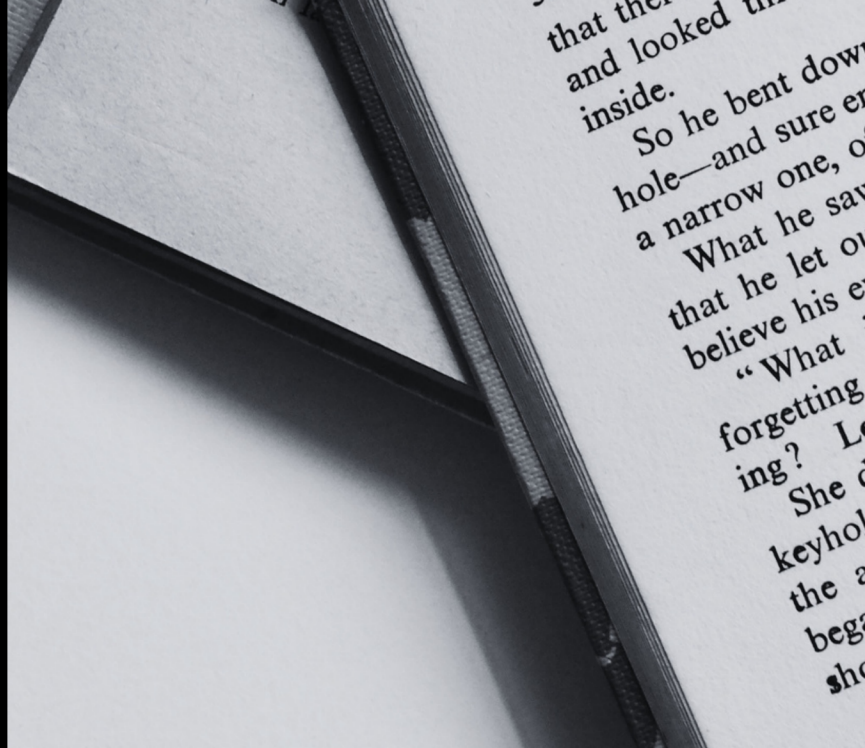


**THE
BEST
CHRISTMAS
STORIES**
FOR MIDDLE AND
HIGH SCHOOL

TRUMAN CAPOTE / DR. SEUSS /
JACK LONDON / O' HENRY /
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD /
CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

A RELUCTANT READER BOOKS GUIDE

BEST CHRISTMAS STORIES FOR MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL



A CHRISTMAS MEMORY

by Truman Capote

The classic story of a young boy's Christmas adventures with his elderly friend.

THE GRINCH

by Dr. Seuss

The classic children's story about the biggest Scrooge of all.

A KLONDIKE CHRISTMAS

by Jack London

A comic tale of putting together a Christmas feast in the Far North of the Yukon Territory.



THE POLAR EXPRESS

by Chris Van Allsburg

The moving tale of about Christmas and belief.

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

by Dr. Seuss

The classic children's story about the biggest Scrooge of all.

THE KIT-BAG

by Algernon Blackwood

A haunting ghost story about a murderer and his favorite luggage.

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Finn and Jamie are spending the summer with relatives they've never met. Uncle Silas and Aunt Ida live in the middle of nowhere. Next to a cemetery. They drive a hearse. And run a funeral home. And sleep in coffins.

But the real horrors are just beginning. Not everyone is resting peacefully in Eldorado Cemetery. Graves are being dug up. The sound of crying is coming from crypts closed for centuries. Someone is stalking the graveyard at night.

But don't worry. The dead can't really come back to life.

Can they?



The last car Danny Ferry's dad worked on before he died was a sleek black taxi cab. It's still sitting in his dad's garage. The owner dropped it off and never came back.

One day Danny finds the keys and turns on the radio. But it isn't music he picks up on the dial. It's voices. Dead voices. Voices that call his name...and want a ride.

Now Danny's got a new gig: taxi driver for the recently deceased. Except not everybody's happy now that Danny's behind the wheel.

And when the dead get angry, they really come to life.



Horacio and Karina just moved into the Gold Bug Apartments in Nevermore. Seems nice. People there are friendly. There's even an old school elevator originally from a famous Chicago hotel with buttons for fifty different floors.

But not one for 13. Too unlucky. Not that it matters. The Gold Bug only has four floors anyway. Or so Horacio thinks. Until he follows Karina one night while she's sleepwalking and discovers a button for 13 after all.

Karina already pushed it. And now the elevator's going up. And up. And up. And where it stops, nobody knows.

“MOM WAS SUPER EXCITED. DUKE HARDLY EVER READS AND SHE COULDN'T BELIEVE HE HAD FINALLY FOUND A BOOK HE COULDN'T/WOULDN'T PUT DOWN.”

— MRS. BANKSON, 7TH GRADE TEACHER



A CHRISTMAS MEMORY

by Truman Capote

Imagine a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning more than twenty years ago. Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house in a country town. A great black stove is its main feature; but there is also a big round table and a fireplace with two rocking chairs placed in front of it. Just today the fireplace commenced its seasonal roar.

A woman with shorn white hair is standing at the kitchen window. She is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a bantam hen; but, due to a long youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable—not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored

and timid. "Oh my," she exclaims, her breath smoking the windowpane, "it's fruitcake weather!"

The person to whom she is speaking is myself. I am seven; she is sixty-something. We are cousins, very distant ones, and we have lived together—well, as long as I can remember. Other people inhabit the house, relatives; and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best friend. She calls me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880's, when she was still a child. She is still a child.

"I knew it before I got out of bed," she says, turning away from the window with a purposeful excitement in her eyes. "The courthouse bell sounded so cold and clear. And there were no birds singing; they've gone to warmer country, yes indeed. Oh,

“

*The other Buddy
died in the
1880's when she
was still a child.
She's still a
child.*

Buddy, stop stuffing biscuit and fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat. We've thirty cakes to bake."

It's always the same: a morning arrives in November, and my friend, as though officially inaugurating the Christmas time of year that exhilarates her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces: "It's fruitcake weather! Fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat."



The hat is found, a straw cartwheel corsaged with velvet roses out-of-doors has faded: it once belonged to a more fashionable relative. Together, we guide our buggy, a dilapidated baby carriage, out to the garden and into a grove of pecan trees. The buggy is mine; that is, it was bought for me when I was born. It is made of wicker, rather unraveled, and the wheels wobble like a drunkard's legs. But it is a faithful object; springtimes, we take it to the woods and fill it with flowers, herbs, wild fern for our porch pots; in the summer, we pile it with picnic paraphernalia and sugar-cane fishing poles and roll it down to the edge of a creek; it has its winter uses, too: as a truck for hauling firewood from the yard to the kitchen, as a warm bed for Queenie, our tough little orange and white rat terrier who has survived distemper and two rattlesnake bites. Queenie is trotting beside it now.

Three hours later we are back in the kitchen hulling a heaping buggyload of windfall pecans. Our backs hurt from gathering them: how hard they were to find (the main crop having been shaken off the trees and sold by the orchard's owners, who are not us) among the concealing leaves, the frosted, deceiving grass. Caarackle! A cheery crunch, scraps of miniature thunder sound as the shells collapse and the golden mound of sweet oily ivory meat mounts in the milk-glass bowl. Queenie begs to taste, and now and again my friend sneaks her a mite, though insisting we deprive ourselves. "We mustn't, Buddy. If we start, we won't stop. And there's scarcely enough as there is. For thirty cakes." The kitchen is growing dark. Dusk turns the window into a mirror: our reflections mingle with the rising moon as we work by the fireside in the firelight. At last, when the moon is quite high, we toss the final hull into the fire and, with joined sighs, watch it catch flame. The buggy is empty, the bowl is brimful.

We eat our supper (cold biscuits, bacon, blackberry jam) and discuss tomorrow. Tomorrow the kind of work I like best begins: buying. Cherries and citron, ginger and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pine-apple, rinds and raisins and walnuts and whiskey and oh, so much flour, butter, so many eggs, spices, flavorings: why, we'll need a pony to pull the buggy home.

But before these Purchases can be made, there is the question of money. Neither of us has any. Except for skin-flint sums persons in the house occasionally provide (a dime is considered very big money); or what we earn ourselves from various activities: holding rummage sales, selling buckets of hand-picked blackberries, jars of home-made jam

and apple jelly and peach preserves, rounding up flowers for funerals and weddings. Once we won seventy-ninth prize, five dollars, in a national football contest. Not that we know a fool thing about football. It's just that we enter any contest we hear about: at the moment our hopes are centered on the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize being offered to name a new brand of coffee (we suggested "A.M."; and, after some hesitation, for my friend thought it perhaps sacrilegious, the slogan "A.M.! Amen!"). To tell the truth, our only really profitable enterprise was the Fun and Freak Museum we conducted in a backyard woodshed two summers ago. The Fun was a stereopticon with slide views of Washington and New York lent us by a relative who had been to those places (she was furious when she discovered why we'd borrowed it); the Freak was a threelegged biddy chicken hatched by one of our own hens. Every body hereabouts wanted to see that biddy: we charged grown ups a nickel, kids two cents. And took in a good twenty dollars before the museum shut down due to the decease of the main attraction.

But one way and another we do each year accumulate Christmas savings, a Fruitcake Fund. These moneys we keep hidden in an ancient bead purse under a loose board under the floor under a chamber pot under my friend's bed. The purse is seldom removed from this safe location except to make a deposit or, as happens every Saturday, a withdrawal; for on Saturdays I am allowed ten cents to go to the picture show. My friend has never been to a picture show, nor does she intend to: "I'd rather hear you tell the story, Buddy. That way I can imagine it more. Besides, a person my age shouldn't squander their eyes. When the Lord comes, let me see him clear." In addition to never having seen a movie, she has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm, told a lie on purpose, let a hungry dog go hungry. Here are a few things she has done, does do: killed with a hoe the biggest rattlesnake ever seen in this county (sixteen rattles), dip snuff (secretly), tame hummingbirds (just try it) till they balance on her finger, tell ghost stories (we both believe in ghosts) so tingling they chill you in July, talk to herself, take walks in the rain, grow the prettiest japonicas in town, know the recipe for every sort of oldtime Indian cure, including a magical wart remover.

Now, with supper finished, we retire to the room in a faraway part of the house where my friend sleeps in a scrap-quilt-covered iron bed painted rose pink, her favorite color. Silently, wallowing in the pleasures of conspiracy, we take

the bead purse from its secret place and spill its contents on the scrap quilt. Dollar bills, tightly rolled and green as May buds. Somber fifty-cent pieces, heavy enough to weight a dead man's eyes. Lovely dimes, the liveliest coin, the one that really jingles. Nickels and quarters, worn smooth as creek pebbles. But mostly a hateful heap of bitter-odored pennies. Last summer others in the house contracted to pay us a penny for every twenty-five flies we killed. Oh, the carnage of August: the flies that flew to heaven! Yet it was not work in which we took pride. And, as we sit counting pennies, it is as though we were back tabulating dead flies. Neither of us has a head for figures; we count slowly, lose track, start again. According to her calculations, we have \$12.73. According to mine, exactly \$13. "I do hope you're wrong, Buddy. We can't mess around with thirteen. The cakes will fall. Or put somebody in the cemetery. Why, I wouldn't dream of getting out of bed on the thirteenth." This is true: she always spends thirteenths in bed. So, to be on the safe side, we subtract a penny and toss it out the window.

Of the ingredients that go into our fruitcakes, whiskey is the most expensive, as well as the hardest to obtain: State laws forbid its sale. But everybody knows you can buy a bottle from Mr. Haha Jones. And the next day, having completed our more prosaic shopping, we set out for Mr. Haha's business address, a "sinful" (to quote public opinion) fish-fry and dancing cafe down by the river. We've been there before, and on the same errand; but in previous years our dealings have been with Haha's wife, an iodine-dark Indian woman with brassy peroxidized hair and a dead-tired disposition. Actually, we've never laid eyes on her husband, though we've heard that he's an Indian too. A giant with razor scars across his cheeks. They call him Haha because he's so gloomy, a man who never laughs. As we approach his cafe (a large log cabin festooned inside and out with chains of garish-gay naked light bulbs and standing by the river's muddy edge under the shade of river trees where moss drifts through the branches like gray mist) our steps slow down. Even Queenie stops prancing and sticks close by. People have been murdered in Haha's cafe. Cut to pieces. Hit on the head. There's a case coming up in court next month. Naturally these goings-on happen at night when the colored lights cast crazy patterns and the Victrolah wails. In the daytime Haha's is shabby and deserted. I knock at the door, Queenie barks, my friend calls: "Mrs. Haha, ma'am? Anyone to home?"

Footsteps. The door opens. Our hearts overturn. It's Mr. Haha Jones himself! And he is a giant; he does have scars; he doesn't smile. No, he glowers at us through Satan-tilted eyes

and demands to know: "What you want with Haha?"

For a moment we are too paralyzed to tell. Presently my friend half-finds her voice, a whispery voice at best: "If you please, Mr. Haha, we'd like a quart of your finest whiskey."

His eyes tilt more. Would you believe it? Haha is smiling! Laughing, too. "Which one of you is a drinkin' man?"

"It's for making fruitcakes, Mr. Haha. Cooking. "

This sobers him. He frowns. "That's no way to waste good whiskey." Nevertheless, he retreats into the shadowed cafe and seconds later appears carrying a bottle of daisy-yellow unlabeled liquor. He demonstrates its sparkle in the sunlight and says: "Two dollars."

We pay him with nickels and dimes and pennies. Suddenly, as he jangles the coins in his hand like a fistful of dice, his face softens. "Tell you what," he proposes, pouring the money back into our bead purse, "just send me one of them fruitcakes instead."

"Well," my friend remarks on our way home, "there's a lovely man. We'll put an extra cup of raisins in his cake."

The black stove, stoked with coal and firewood, glows like a lighted pumpkin. Eggbeaters whirl, spoons spin round in bowls of butter and sugar, vanilla sweetens the air, ginger spices it; melting, nose-tingling odors saturate the kitchen, suffuse the house, drift out to the world on puffs of chimney smoke. In four days our work is done. Thirty-one cakes, dampened with whiskey, bask on windowsills and shelves.

Who are they for?

Friends. Not necessarily neighbor friends: indeed, the larger share is intended for persons we've met maybe once, perhaps not at all. People who've struck our fancy. Like President Roosevelt. Like the Reverend and Mrs. J. C. Lucey, Baptist missionaries to Borneo who lectured here last winter. Or the little knife grinder who comes through town twice a year. Or Abner Packer, the driver of the six o'clock bus from Mobile, who exchanges waves with us every day as he passes in a dust-cloud whoosh. Or the young Wistons, a California couple whose car one afternoon broke down outside the house and who spent a pleasant hour chatting with us on the porch (young Mr. Wiston snapped our picture, the only one we've ever had taken). Is it because my friend is shy with

everyone except strangers that these strangers, and merest acquaintances, seem to us our truest friends? I think yes. Also, the scrapbooks we keep of thank-you's on White House stationery, time-to-time communications from California and Borneo, the knife grinder's penny post cards, make us feel connected to eventful worlds beyond the kitchen with its view of a sky that stops.

Now a nude December fig branch grates against the window. The kitchen is empty, the cakes are gone; yesterday we carted the last of them to the post office, where the cost of stamps turned our purse inside out. We're broke. That rather depresses me, but my friend insists on celebrating—with two inches of whiskey left in Haha's bottle. Queenie has a spoonful in a bowl of coffee (she likes her coffee chicory-flavored and strong). The rest we divide between a pair of jelly glasses. We're both quite awed at the prospect of drinking straight whiskey; the taste of it brings screwedup expressions and sour shudders. But by and by we begin to sing, the two of us singing different songs simultaneously. I don't know the words to mine, just: Come on along, come on along, to the dark-town strutters' ball. But I can dance: that's what I mean to be, a tap dancer in the movies. My dancing shadow rollicks on the walls; our voices rock the chinaware; we giggle: as if unseen hands were tickling us. Queenie rolls on her back, her paws plow the air, something like a grin stretches her black lips. Inside myself, I feel warm and sparky as those crumbling logs, carefree as the wind in the chimney. My friend waltzes round the stove, the hem of her poor calico skirt pinched between her fingers as though it were a party dress: Show me the way to go home, she sings, her tennis shoes squeaking on the floor. Show me the way to go home.

Enter: two relatives. Very angry. Potent with eyes that scold, tongues that scald. Listen to what they have to say, the words tumbling together into a wrathful tune: "A child of seven! whiskey on his breath! are you out of your mind? feeding a child of seven! must be loony! road to ruination! remember Cousin Kate? Uncle Charlie? Uncle Charlie's brother-inlaw? shame! scandal! humiliation! kneel, pray, beg the Lord!"

Queenie sneaks under the stove. My friend gazes at her shoes, her chin quivers, she lifts her skirt and blows her nose and runs to her room. Long after the town has gone to sleep and the house is silent except for the chimings of clocks and the sputter of fading fires, she is weeping into a pillow already as wet as a widow's handkerchief.

"Don't cry," I say, sitting at the bottom of her bed and

shivering despite my flannel nightgown that smells of last winter's cough syrup, "Don't cry," I beg, teasing her toes, tickling her feet, "you're too old for that."

"It's because," she hiccups, "I am too old. Old and funny."

"Not funny. Fun. More fun than anybody. Listen. If you don't stop crying you'll be so tired tomorrow we can't go cut a tree."

She straightens up. Queenie jumps on the bed (where Queenie is not allowed) to lick her cheeks. "I know where we'll find real pretty trees, Buddy. And holly, too. With berries big as your eyes. It's way off in the woods. Farther than we've ever been. Papa used to bring us Christmas trees from there: carry them on his shoulder. That's fifty years ago. Well, now: I can't wait for morning."

Morning. Frozen rime lusters the grass; the sun, round as an orange and orange as hot-weather moons, balances on the horizon, burnishes the silvered winter woods. A wild turkey calls. A renegade hog grunts in the undergrowth. Soon, by the edge of knee-deep, rapid-running water, we have to abandon the buggy. Queenie wades the stream first, paddles across barking complaints at the swiftness of the current, the pneumonia-making coldness of it. We follow, holding our shoes and equipment (a hatchet, a burlap sack) above our heads. A mile more: of chastising thorns, burrs and briers that catch at our clothes; of rusty pine needles brilliant with gaudy fungus and molted feathers. Here, there, a flash, a flutter, an ecstasy of shrillings remind us that not all the birds have flown south. Always, the path unwinds through lemony sun pools and pitchblack vine tunnels. Another creek to cross: a disturbed armada of speckled trout froths the water round us, and frogs the size of plates practice belly flops; beaver workmen are building a dam. On the farther shore, Queenie shakes herself and trembles. My friend shivers, too: not with cold but enthusiasm. One of her hat's ragged roses sheds a petal as she lifts her head and inhales the pine-heavy air. "We're almost there; can you smell it, Buddy?" she says, as though we were approaching an ocean.

And, indeed, it is a kind of ocean. Scented acres of holiday trees, prickly-leafed holly. Red berries shiny as Chinese bells: black crows swoop upon them screaming. Having stuffed our burlap sacks with enough greenery and crimson to garland a dozen windows, we set about choosing a tree. "It should be," muses my friend, "twice as tall as a boy. So a boy can't steal the star." The one we pick is twice as tall as me. A brave

handsome brute that survives thirty hatchet strokes before it keels with a creaking rending cry. Lugging it like a kill, we commence the long trek out. Every few yards we abandon the struggle, sit down and pant. But we have the strength of triumphant huntsmen; that and the tree's virile, icy perfume revive us, goad us on. Many compliments accompany our sunset return along the red clay road to town; but my friend is sly and noncommittal when passers-by praise the treasure perched in our buggy: what a fine tree, and where did it come from? "Yonderways," she murmurs vaguely. Once a car stops, and the rich mill owner's lazy wife leans out and whines: "Giveya two-bits" cash for that ol tree." Ordinarily my friend is afraid of saying no; but on this occasion she promptly shakes her head: "We wouldn't take a dollar." The mill owner's wife persists. "A dollar, my foot! Fifty cents. That's my last offer. Goodness, woman, you can get another one." In answer, my friend gently reflects: "I doubt it. There's never two of anything."

Home: Queenie slumps by the fire and sleeps till tomorrow, snoring loud as a human.

A trunk in the attic contains: a shoebox of ermine tails (off the opera cape of a curious lady who once rented a room in the house), coils of frazzled tinsel gone gold with age, one silver star, a brief rope of dilapidated, undoubtedly dangerous candylight bulbs. Excellent decorations, as far as they go, which isn't far enough: my friend wants our tree to blaze "like a Baptist window," droop with weighty snows of ornament. But we can't afford the made-in-Japan splendors at the five-and-dime. So we do what we've always done: sit for days at the kitchen table with scissors and crayons and stacks of colored paper. I make sketches and my friend cuts them out: lots of cats, fish too (because they're easy to draw), some apples, some watermelons, a few winged angels devised from saved-up sheets of Hershey bar tin foil. We use safety pins to attach these creations to the tree; as a final touch, we sprinkle the branches with shredded cotton (picked in August for this purpose). My friend, surveying the effect, clasps her hands together. "Now honest, Buddy. Doesn't it look good enough to eat!" Queenie tries to eat an angel.

After weaving and ribboning holly wreaths for all the front windows, our next project is the fashioning of family gifts. Tie-dye scarves for the ladies, for the men a homebrewed lemon and licorice and aspirin syrup to be taken "at the first Symptoms of a Cold and after Hunting." But when it comes time for making each other's gift, my friend and I separate to work secretly. I would like to buy her a pearl-handled knife, a

radio, a whole pound of chocolate-covered cherries (we tasted some once, and she always swears: "I could live on them, Buddy, Lord yes I could—and that's not taking his name in vain"). Instead, I am building her a kite. She would like to give me a bicycle (she's said so on several million occasions: "If only I could, Buddy. It's bad enough in life to do without something you want; but confound it, what gets my goat is not being able to give somebody something you want them to have. Only one of these days I will, Buddy. Locate you a bike. Don't ask how. Steal it, maybe"). Instead, I'm fairly certain that she is building me a kite—the same as last year and the year before: the year before that we exchanged slingshots. All of which is fine by me. For we are champion kite fliers who study the wind like sailors; my friend, more accomplished than I, can get a kite aloft when there isn't enough breeze to carry clouds.

Christmas Eve afternoon we scrape together a nickel and go to the butcher's to buy Queenie's traditional gift, a good gnawable beef bone. The bone, wrapped in funny paper, is placed high in the tree near the silver star. Queenie knows it's there. She squats at the foot of the tree staring up in a trance of greed: when bedtime arrives she refuses to budge. Her excitement is equaled by my own. I kick the covers and turn my pillow as though it were a scorching summer's night. Somewhere a rooster crows: falsely, for the sun is still on the other side of the world.

"Buddy, are you awake!" It is my friend, calling from her room, which is next to mine; and an instant later she is sitting on my bed holding a candle. "Well, I can't sleep a hoot," she declares. "My mind's jumping like a jack rabbit. Buddy, do you think Mrs. Roosevelt will serve our cake at dinner?" We huddle in the bed, and she squeezes my hand I-love-you. "Seems like your hand used to be so much smaller. I guess I hate to see you grow up. When you're grown up, will we still be friends?" I say always. "But I feel so bad, Buddy. I wanted so bad to give you a bike. I tried to sell my cameo Papa gave me. Buddy"—she hesitates, as though embarrassed—"I made you another kite." Then I confess that I made her one, too; and we laugh. The candle burns too short to hold. Out it goes, exposing the starlight, the stars spinning at the window like a visible caroling that slowly, slowly daybreak silences. Possibly we doze; but the beginnings of dawn splash us like cold water: we're up, wide-eyed and wandering while we wait for others to waken. Quite deliberately my friend drops a kettle on the kitchen floor. I tapdance in front of closed doors. One by one the household emerges, looking as though they'd like to kill us both; but it's Christmas, so they can't. First, a

gorgeous breakfast: just everything you can imagine—from flapjacks and fried squirrel to hominy grits and honey-in-the-comb. Which puts everyone in a good humor except my friend and me. Frankly, we're so impatient to get at the presents we can't eat a mouthful.

Well, I'm disappointed. Who wouldn't be? With socks, a Sunday school shirt, some handkerchiefs, a hand-me-down sweater, and a year's subscription to a religious magazine for children. The Little Shepherd. It makes me boil. It really does.

My friend has a better haul. A sack of Satsumas, that's her best present. She is proudest, however, of a white wool shawl knitted by her married sister. But she says her favorite gift is the kite I built her. And it is very beautiful; though not as beautiful as the one she made me, which is blue and scattered with gold and green Good Conduct stars; moreover, my name is painted on it, "Buddy."

"Buddy, the wind is blowing."

The wind is blowing, and nothing will do till we've run to a Pasture below the house where Queenie has scooted to bury her bone (and where, a winter hence, Queenie will be buried, too). There, plunging through the healthy waist-high grass, we unreel our kites, feel them twitching at the string like sky fish as they swim into the wind. Satisfied, sun-warmed, we sprawl in the grass and peel Satsumas and watch our kites cavort. Soon I forget the socks and hand-me-down sweater. I'm as happy as if we'd already won the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize in that coffee-naming contest.

"My, how foolish I am!" my friend cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. "You know what I've always thought?" she asks in a tone of discovery and not smiling at me but a point beyond. "I've always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when he came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I'll wager it never happens. I'll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are"—her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone—"just what they've always seen, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes."

This is our last Christmas together.

Life separates us. Those who Know Best decide that I belong in a military school. And so follows a miserable succession of bugle-blowing prisons, grim reveille-ridden summer camps. I have a new home too. But it doesn't count. Home is where my friend is, and there I never go.

And there she remains, puttering around the kitchen. Alone with Queenie. Then alone. ("Buddy dear," she writes in her wild hard-to-read script, "yesterday Jim Macy's horse kicked Queenie bad. Be thankful she didn't feel much. I wrapped her in a Fine Linen sheet and rode her in the buggy down to Simpson's pasture where she can be with all her Bones...."). For a few Novembers she continues to bake her fruitcakes single-handed; not as many, but some: and, of course, she always sends me "the best of the batch." Also, in every letter she encloses a dime wadded in toilet paper: "See a picture show and write me the story." But gradually in her letters she tends to confuse me with her other friend, the Buddy who died in the 1880's; more and more, thirteenthths are not the only days she stays in bed: a morning arrives in November, a leafless birdless coming of winter morning, when she cannot rouse herself to exclaim: "Oh my, it's fruitcake weather!"

And when that happens, I know it. A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received, severing from me an irreplaceable part of myself, letting it loose like a kite on a broken string. That is why, walking across a school campus on this particular December morning, I keep searching the sky. As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven.



HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS

by Dr. Seuss

Every Who Down in Whoville Liked Christmas a lot...

But the Grinch, Who lived just north of Whoville, Did NOT!

The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!

Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.

It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.

It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.

But I think that the most likely
reason of all,

May have been that his heart was
two sizes too small.

Whatever the reason, His heart or
his shoes,

He stood there on Christmas Eve,
hating the Whos,

Staring down from his cave with
a sour, Grinchy frown,

At the warm lighted windows
below in their town.

For he knew every Who down in
Whoville beneath,

Was busy now, hanging a
mistletoe wreath.

"And they're hanging their
stockings!" he snarled with a
sneer,

"Tomorrow is Christmas! It's
practically here!"

“

*The Grinch
hated Christmas!
The whole
Christmas
season!*

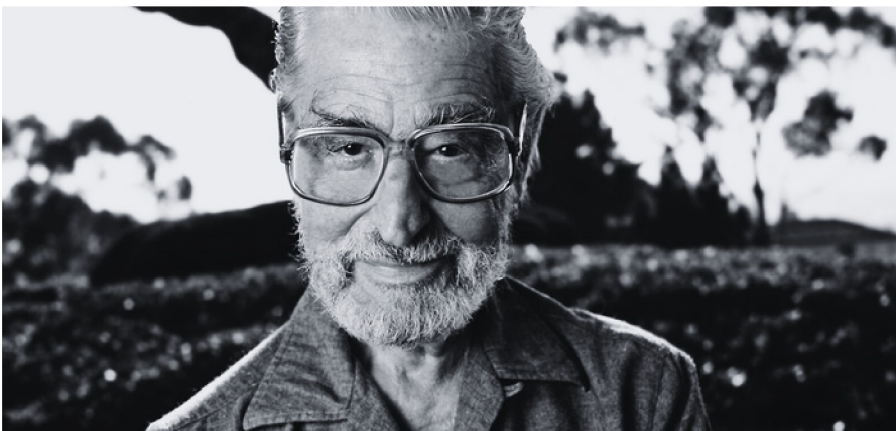
Then he growled, with his Grinch
fingers nervously drumming,

"I MUST find some way to stop
Christmas from coming!"

For Tomorrow, he knew, all the
Who girls and boys,

Would wake bright and early.
They'd rush for their toys!

And then! Oh, the noise! Oh, the
Noise!



Noise! Noise! Noise!

That's one thing he hated! The NOISE!

NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!

Then the Whos, young and old, would sit down to a feast.

And they'd feast! And they'd feast! And they'd FEAST!

FEAST! FEAST! FEAST!

They would feast on Who-pudding, and rare Who-roast
beast.

Which was something the Grinch couldn't stand in the least!

And THEN They'd do something He liked least of all!

Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,

Would stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing.

They'd stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start
singing!

They'd sing! And they'd sing! And they'd SING!

SING! SING! SING!

And the more the Grinch thought of this Who ChristmasSing,

The more the Grinch thought, "I must stop this whole thing!"

"Why, for fifty-three years I've put up with it now!"

"I MUST stop this Christmas from coming! But HOW?"

Then he got an idea! An awful idea!

THE GRINCH GOT A WONDERFUL, AWFUL IDEA!

"I know just what to do!" The Grinch laughed in his throat.

And he made a quick Santy Claus hat and a coat.

And he chuckled, and clucked, "What a great Grinchy trick!"

"With this coat and this hat, I look just like Saint Nick!"

"All I need is a reindeer..." The Grinch looked around.

But, since reindeer are scarce, there was none to be found.

Did that stop the old Grinch? No! The Grinch simply said,

"If I can't find a reindeer, I'll make one instead!"

So he called his dog, Max. Then he took some red thread,

And he tied a big horn on the top of his head.

THEN He loaded some bags And some old empty sacks,

On a ramshackle sleigh And he hitched up old Max.

Then the Grinch said, "Giddap!" And the sleigh started down,

Toward the homes where the Whos Lay asnooze in their
town.

All their windows were dark. Quiet snow filled the air.

All the Whos were all dreaming sweet dreams without care.

When he came to the first little house on the square.

"This is stop number one," the old Grinchy Claus hissed,

And he climbed to the roof, empty bags in his fist.

Then he slid down the chimney. A rather tight pinch.

But, if Santa could do it, then so could the Grinch.

He got stuck only once, for a moment or two.

Then he stuck his head out of the fireplace flue.

Where the little Who stockings all hung in a row.

"These stockings," he grinned, "are the first things to go!"

Then he slithered and slunk, with a smile most unpleasant,

Around the whole room, and he took every present!

Pop guns! And bicycles! Roller skates! Drums!

Checkerboards! Tricycles! Popcorn! And plums!

And he stuffed them in bags. Then the Grinch, very nimbly,

Stuffed all the bags, one by one, up the chimney!

Then he slunk to the icebox. He took the Whos' feast!

He took the Who-pudding! He took the roast beast!

He cleaned out that icebox as quick as a flash.

Why, that Grinch even took their last can of Who-hash!

Then he stuffed all the food up the chimney with glee.

"And NOW!" grinned the Grinch, "I will stuff up the tree!"

And the Grinch grabbed the tree, and he started to shove,

When he heard a small sound like the coo of a dove.

He turned around fast, and he saw a small Who!

Little Cindy-Lou Who, who was not more than two.

The Grinch had been caught by this tiny Who daughter,

Who'd got out of bed for a cup of cold water.

She stared at the Grinch and said, "Santy Claus, why,"

"Why are you taking our Christmas tree? WHY?"

But, you know, that old Grinch was so smart and so slick,

He thought up a lie, and he thought it up quick!

"Why, my sweet little tot," the fake Santy Claus lied,

"There's a light on this tree that won't light on one side."

"So I'm taking it home to my workshop, my dear."

"I'll fix it up there. Then I'll bring it back here."

And his fib fooled the child. Then he patted her head,

And he got her a drink and he sent her to bed.

And when CindyLou Who went to bed with her cup,

HE went to the chimney and stuffed the tree up!

Then the last thing he took Was the log for their fire!

Then he went up the chimney, himself, the old liar.

On their walls he left nothing but hooks and some wire.

And the one speck of food That he left in the house,

Was a crumb that was even too small for a mouse.

Then He did the same thing To the other Whos' houses

Leaving crumbs Much too small For the other Whos' mice!

It was quarter past dawn... All the Whos, still a-bed,

All the Whos, still asnooze When he packed up his sled,

Packed it up with their presents! The ribbons! The wrappings!

The tags! And the tinsel! The trimmings! The trappings!

Three thousand feet up! Up the side of Mt. Crumpit,

He rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!

"PoohPooh to the Whos!" he was grinchishly humming.

"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming!"

"They're just waking up! I know just what they'll do!"

"Their mouths will hang open a minute or two,

Then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry BooHoo!"

"That's a noise," grinned the Grinch, "That I simply MUST hear!"

So he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.

And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.

It started in low. Then it started to grow.

But the sound wasn't sad! Why, this sound sounded merry!

It couldn't be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!

He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!

Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,

Was singing! Without any presents at all!

He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!

Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"

"It came with out ribbons! It came without tags!"

"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."

"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

And what happened then? Well...in Whoville they say,

That the Grinch's small heart Grew three sizes that day!

And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,

He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light,

And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!

And he, HE HIMSELF! The Grinch carved the roast beast!



A KLONDIKE CHRISTMAS

by Jack London

*Mouth of the Stuart River
North West Territory
December 25, 1897*

My dearest Mother:—

Here we are, all safe and sound, and snugly settled down in winter quarters.

Have received no letters yet, so you can imagine how we long to hear from home. We are in the shortest days of the year, and the sun no longer rises, even at twelve o'clock.

Uncle Hiram and Mr. Carter have gone to Dawson to record some placer claims and to get the mail, if there is any. They took the dogs and sled with them, as they had to travel on the ice. We did expect them home for Christmas dinner, but I guess George and I will have to eat alone.

I am to be cook, so you can be sure that we'll have a jolly dinner. We will begin with the staples first. There will be fried bacon, baked beans, bread raised from sour-dough, and—

He seemed perplexed, and after dubiously scratching his head a couple of times, laid down the pen. Once or twice, he tried to go on, but eventually gave it up, his face assuming a very disgusted expression. He was a robust young fellow of eighteen or nineteen, and the merry twinkle which lurked in his eyes gave the lie to his counterfeited displeasure.

It was a snug little cabin in which he sat. Built of unbarked logs, measuring not more than ten by

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It was a snug little cabin in which he sat...by a roaring Yukon stove, it seemed more homelike to him than any house he had ever lived in...

twelve feet on the inside, and heated by a roaring Yukon-stove, it seemed more homelike to him than any house he had ever lived in, except—of course, always the one, real home.



Two bunks, table and stove, occupied two-thirds of the room, but every inch of space was utilized. Revolvers, rifles, hunting-knives, belts and clothes, hung from three of the walls in picturesque confusion; the remaining one being hidden by a set of shelves, which held all their cooking utensils. Though already eleven o'clock in the morning, a sort of twilight prevailed outside, while it would have been quite dark within, if it had not been for the slush-lamp. This was merely a shallow, tin cup, filled with bacon grease. A piece of cotton caulking served for a wick; the heat of the flame melting the grease as fast as required.

He leaned his elbows on the table and became absorbed in a deep scrutiny of the lamp. He was really not interested in it, and did not even know he was looking at it, so intent was he in trying to discover what else there could possibly be for dinner.

The door was thrown open at this moment, and a stalwart young fellow entered with a rush of cold air, kicking off his snow shoes at the threshold.

"Bout time for dinner, isn't it?" he asked gruffly, as he took off his mittens. But his brother Clarence had just discovered that "bacon," "beans" and "bread" all began with "b," and did not reply. George's face was covered with ice, so he contented himself with holding it over the stove to thaw. The rattle of the icy chunks on the sheet-iron was getting monotonous, when Clarence deigned to reply by asking a question.

"What's 'b' stand for?"

"Bad, of course," was the prompt answer.

"Just what I thought," and he sighed with great solemnity.

"But how about the dinner? You're cook. It's time to begin. What have you been doing? Oh! Writing! Let's see."

His jaw fell when he got to "bacon, beans and bread," and he said; "It won't do to write home that that's all we've got for Christmas dinner. It would make them worry, you know. Say, haven't we some dried apples?"

"Half a cup. Not enough for a pie."

"They'll swell, you ninny. Sit down and add apple pie to that

list of yours. And say dumplings, too, while you're at it. We can make a stagger at them—put two pieces of apple in two lumps of dough and boil them. Never say die. We'll make them think we're living like princes when they read that."

Clarence did as directed, and then sat with such a look of query on his face as to make George nervous and doubtful.

"Pretty slim after all," he mused. "Let's see if we can't find something else—bread, flapjacks and—and—why flour-gravy, of course."

"We can bake, and boil, and fry the beans," Clarence suggested; "but what's to be done with the bacon except to fry it, I can't see."

"Why parboil it; that makes another course, nine altogether. How much more do you want, anyway?" And then to change the subject, "How cold do you think it is?"

Clarence critically studied the ice which had crept far up the cracks in the door, and then gave his judgment; "Past fifty."

"The spirit thermometer gives sixty-five, and it's still falling." George could not prevent an exultant ring in his voice, though if he had been asked why, he would not have known.

"And water freezes at thirty-two degrees above zero," Clarence began to calculate. "That makes ninety-seven degrees of frost. Phew! Wouldn't that open the eyes of the folks at home!"

So, like the two boys that they were, they temporarily forgot their monotonous fare in an exciting discussion of the whys and wherefores of cold. But when one is afflicted with a healthy appetite he can not escape from it very long at a time, and at twelve o'clock they set about cooking their slender meal.

George went into the cache for bacon, and begun to rummage about in odd places to see what he could find. Now the cache, or place where their food was stored to keep it away from the perpetually-hungry native dogs, was built onto the back of the cabin. Clarence heard the racket he was making, and when he began to cheer and cry out "Eureka! Eureka!" he ran out to see what had happened.

"Manna! brother mine! Manna! dropped from the clouds for

the starving children of Israel!" he cried, waving a large can above his head. "Mock-turtle soup. Found it in the tool box," he went on, as they carried it into the cabin.

True enough; it was a quart-can of specially prepared and very rich mock-turtle soup. They sang and danced and were as jubilant as though they had found a gold mine. Clarence added the item to the bill of fare in his letter, while George strove to divide it up into two items, or even more. He showed a special aptitude for this kind of work; but how many tempting dishes he would have finally succeeded in evolving out of it, shall never be known, for at that moment they heard a dog team pull up the river bank before the cabin.

The next instant the door opened, and two strangers came in. They were grotesque sights. Their heads were huge balls of ice, with little holes where their mouths should have been, through which they breathed. Unable to open their mouths or speak, they shook hands with the boys and headed for the stove. Clarence and George exchanged glances and watched their strange visitors curiously.

"Wal, it's jes' this way," one of them began, as he shook the remaining chunks of ice from his whiskers; "me an' my pard ha' ben nigh on two months, now, over on the Mazy May, with nothin' to eat but straight meat. Nary flour, nary beans, nary bacon. So me an' him sorto' talked it over, an' figgered it out. At last I sez, 'Wot yeh say, Jim? Let's cross the divide an' strike some camp on the Yukon, an' git some civilized grub again? Git a reg'lar Christmas dinner? An' he sez 'I'll go yeh, by gum.' An' here we be. How air yeh off fer meat? Got a hundred pound or so, on the sled outside."

Just as Clarence and George were assuring him that he was heartily welcome, the other man tore away the last hindrance to his speech, and broke in; "Say, lads; yeh haint got a leetle bit o' bread yeh might spare. I'm thet hungry fer jes' a leetle bit—"

"Yeh jes' shet up, Jim!" cried his partner indignantly. "Ye'd make these kids think yeh might be starvin'. Haint yeh had all yeh wanted to eat?"

"Yes," was the gloomy reply; "but nothin' but straight meat."

However, Clarence put an end to the discussion by setting the table with sour-dough bread and cold bacon, having first

made them promise not to spoil their appetites for the dinner. The poor fellows handled the heavy bread reverently, and went into ecstasies of delight over it. Then they went out, unharnessed the dogs, and brought some magnificent pieces of moose meat in with them. The boys' mouths watered at the sight, for they were longing for it just as much as the others longed for the bread.

"Porterhouse moose-steak," whispered George; "tenderloin, sirloin and round; liver and bacon; rib-roast of moose, moose stew and fried sweet breads. Hurry, Clarence, and add them to the bill of fare."

"Now don't bother me. I'm cook, and I'm going to boss this dinner, so you obey orders. Take a piece of that meat and go down to the cabin on the next island. They'd give most anything for it, so see that you make a good trade."

The hungry strangers sat on the bunk and watched proceedings with satisfied countenances, while Clarence mixed and kneaded the dough for a baking of bread. In a short time George returned, with one cup of dried apples and five prunes. Yet they were all disappointed at his failure to get sugar. But the dinner already promised to be such a grand affair that they could readily forego such trifling matter as sweets.

Just as Clarence was shortening the pie-dough with bacon grease, a second sled pulled up at the door, and another stranger entered. A vivid picture he made, as he stood for an instant in the doorway. Though his eyebrows and lashes were matted with ice, his face was clean-shaven, and hence, free from it. From his beaded moccasins to his great gauntleted mittens and wolf-skin cap from Siberia, every article of wearing apparel proclaimed him to be one of the "Eldorado Kings," or millionaire mine-owners of Dawson.

He was a pleasant man to look at, though his heavy jaw and steel-blue eyes gave notice of a firm, indomitable will. About his waist was clasped a leather belt, in which reposed two large Colt's revolvers and a hunting-knife, while in his hand, besides the usual dog whip, he carried a smokeless rifle of the largest bore and latest pattern. They wondered at this, for men in the Klondike rarely go armed, and then because of necessity.

His story was soon told. His own team of seven dogs, the

finest in the country and for which he had recently refused five thousand dollars, had been stolen five days before. He had found the clue, and discovered that the thieves had started out of the country on the ice. He had borrowed a team of dogs from a friend and taken their trail.

They marvelled at his speed, for he had left Dawson at midnight, having traveled the seventy-five miles in twelve hours. He wished to rest the animals and take a few hours sleep, before going on with the chase. He was sure of overtaking them, he said, for they had foolishly started with an eighteen-inch sled, while the regular, trail Yukon-sleds were only sixteen inches wide. Thus, they had to break trail constantly for one of the runners, while his was already broken.

They recognized the party he was after, and assured him that he was certain to catch them in another twelve hours' run. Then he was made welcome and invited to dinner. To their surprise, when he returned from unhitching and feeding his dogs he brought several pounds of sugar and two cans of condensed milk.

"Thought you fellows, up river here, would be out of luxuries," he said, as he threw them upon the table; "and as I wanted to travel light, I brought them along, intending to trade for beans and flour whenever I got a chance. No, never mind thanks. I'm going to eat dinner with you. Call me when it's ready." And he climbed into one of the bunks, falling asleep a moment later.

"I say, Jim. Thet's travelin', aint it?" said the Man from Mazy May, with as much pride as though he had done it himself. "Seventy-five mile in twelve hours, an' thet cold he wa'nt able to ride more'n half the time. Bet ye'd be petered clean out if yeh done the like o' thet."

"Maybe yeh think I can't travel," his partner replied. But before he could tell what a wonderful traveler he was, their dogs and the dogs of the new arrival started a fight, and had to be separated.

At last the dinner was ready, and just as they were calling the "Eldorado King," Uncle Hiram and Mr. Carter arrived.

"Not an ounce of sugar or can of milk to be bought in Dawson," he said. But his jaw dropped as he caught sight of

the sugar and milk on the table, and he sheepishly held up a quart-can of strained honey as his contribution.

This addition necessitated a change in the bill of fare; so when they finally sat down, the first course of mock-turtle soup was followed by hot cakes and honey. While one after another the delicacies of "civilized grub," as they called it, appeared, the eyes of the Men from Mazy May opened wider and wider, and speech seemed to fail them.

But one more surprise was in store for them. They heard a jingle of bells, and another ice-covered traveler entered and claimed their hospitality. The new-comer was an Associated Press reporter, on his way to Dawson from the United States. His first question was concerning the where-abouts of a Mr. Hiram Donaldson, "said to be camped on the Yukon near the mouth of the Stuart River." On Uncle Hiram being pointed out to him, the reporter handed him a letter of introduction from the Mining Syndicate which he, Mr. Donaldson, was representing. Nor was this all. A fat package of letters was also passed over—the longed-for letters from home.

"By gum! This do beat all," said the Man from Mazy May, after a place had been made for the last arrival. But his partner had his mouth so full of apple dumpling that he could only roll his eyes in approval.

"I know what 'b' stands for," whispered George across the table to Clarence.

"So do I. It stands for 'Bully' with a big 'B'."



THE POLAR EXPRESS

by Chris Van Allsburg

On Christmas Eve, many years ago, I lay quietly in my bed. I did not rustle the sheets. I breathed slowly and silently. I was listening for a sound – a sound a friend had told me I'd never hear- the ringing bells of Santa's sleigh.

"There is no Santa," my friend had insisted, but I knew he was wrong.

Late that night I did hear sounds, though not of ringing bells. From outside came the sounds of hissing steam and squeaking metal. I looked through my window and saw a train standing perfectly still in front of my house.

It was wrapped in an apron of steam. Snowflakes fell lightly around it. A

conductor stood at the open door of one of the cars. He took a large pocket watch from his vest, then looked up at my window. I put on my slippers and robe. I tiptoed downstairs and out the door.

"All aboard," the conductor cried out. I ran up to him.

"Well, he said, "are you coming?"

"Where?" I asked.

"Why to the North Pole of course," was his answer. "This is the Polar Express." I took his outstretched hand and he pulled me aboard.

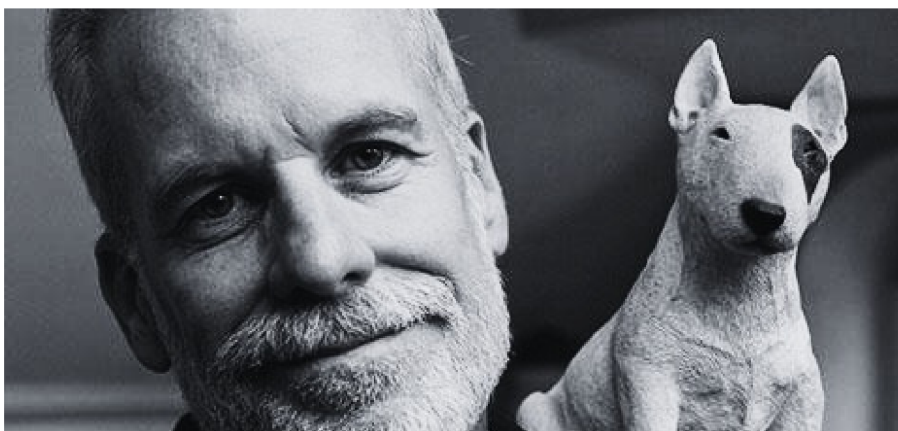
The train was filled with other children, all in their pajamas and nightgowns. We sang Christmas carols and ate candies with nougat centers as white as snow. We drank hot cocoa as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars. Outside, the lights of towns and villages flickered in the distance as the Polar Express raced northward.

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*I looked through
my window and
saw a train
standing
perfectly still in
front of my
house.*

Soon there were no more lights to be seen. We traveled through cold, dark forests, where lean wolves roamed and white-tailed rabbits hid from our train as it thundered through the quiet wilderness.

We climbed mountains so high it seemed as if we would scrape the moon. But the Polar Express never slowed down. Faster and faster we ran along, rolling over peaks and through valleys like a car on a roller coaster.



The mountains turned into hills, the hills to snow-covered plains. We crossed a barren desert of ice—the Great Polar Ice Cap. Lights appeared in the distance. They looked like the lights of a strange ocean liner sailing on a frozen sea. “There,” said the conductor, “is the North Pole.”

The North Pole. It was a huge city standing alone at the top of the world, filled with factories where every Christmas toy was made.

At first we saw no elves.

“They are gathering at the center of the city,” the conductor told us. “That is where Santa will give the first gift of Christmas.”

“Who receives the first gift?” we all asked.

“He will choose one of you.”

“Look,” shouted one of the children, “the elves.” Outside we saw hundreds of elves. As our train drew closer to the center of the North Pole, we slowed to a crawl, so crowded were the streets with Santa’s helpers. When the Polar Express could go no farther, we stopped and the conductor led us outside.

We pressed through the crowd to the edge of a large, open circle. In front of us stood Santa’s sleigh. The reindeer were excited. They pranced and paced, ringing the silver sleigh bells that hung from their harnesses. It was a magical sound, like nothing I’d ever heard. Across the circle, the elves moved apart and Santa Claus appeared. The elves cheered wildly.

He marched over to us and, pointing to me, said, “Let’s have this fellow here” He jumped into his sleigh. The conductor handed me up. I sat on Santa’s knee and he asked, “Now, what would you like for Christmas?”

I knew that I could have any gift I could imagine. But the thing I wanted most for Christmas was not inside Santa’s giant bag. What I wanted more than anything was one silver bell from Santa’s sleigh. When I asked, Santa smiled. Then he gave me a hug and told an elf to cut a bell from a reindeer’s harness. The elf tossed it up to Santa. He stood, holding the bell high above him, and called out, “the first gift of Christmas!”

A clock struck midnight as the elves roared their approval.

Santa handed the bell to me, and I put it in my bathrobe pocket. The conductor helped me down from the sleigh. Santa shouted out the reindeer’s names and cracked his whip. His team charged forward and climbed into the air. Santa circled once above us, then disappeared in the cold, dark polar sky.

As soon as we were back inside the Polar Express, the other children asked to see the bell. I reached into my pocket, but the only thing I felt was a hole. I had lost the silver bell from Santa Claus’s sleigh. “Let’s hurry outside and look for it,” one of the children said. But the train gave a sudden lurch and started moving. We were on our way home.

It broke my heart to lose the bell. When the train reached my house, I sadly left the other children. I stood at my doorway and waved good-bye. The conductor said something from the moving train, but I couldn’t hear him. “What?” I yelled out.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. “MERRY CHRISTMAS,” he shouted. The Polar Express let out a loud blast from its whistle and sped away.

On Christmas morning my little sister Sarah and I opened our presents. When it looked as if everything had been unwrapped, Sarah found one last small box behind the tree. It had my name on it. Inside was the silver bell! There was a note: “Found this on the seat of my sleigh. Fix that hole in your pocket.” Signed, “Mr. C.”

I shook the bell. It made the most beautiful sound my sister and I had ever heard.

But my mother said, “Oh, that’s too bad.”

“Yes,” said my father, “it’s broken.”

When I’d shaken the bell, my parents had not heard a sound.

At one time most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even Sarah found one Christmas that she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I’ve grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe.



THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

by O Henry

ONE DOLLAR AND eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young." The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, the letters of "Dillingham" looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham

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*One dollar and
eighty-seven
cents. That was
all. And sixty
cents of it was in
pennies.*



Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard. Tomorrow would

be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: "Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade. "Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand a

nd sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit for saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice—what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshiped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

nstead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

“Dell,” said he, “let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on.”

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.



THE KIT-BAG

by Algernon Blackwood

When the words 'Not Guilty' sounded through the crowded courtroom that dark December afternoon, Arthur Wilbraham, the great criminal KC, and leader for the triumphant defence, was represented by his junior; but Johnson, his private secretary, carried the verdict across to his chambers like lightning.

'It's what we expected, I think,' said the barrister, without emotion; 'and, personally, I am glad the case is over.' There was no particular sign of pleasure that his defence of John Turk, the murderer, on a plea of insanity, had been successful, for no doubt he felt, as everybody who had watched the case felt, that no man had ever better deserved the gallows.

'I'm glad too,' said Johnson. He had sat in the court for ten days watching the face of the man who had carried out with callous detail one of the most brutal and cold-blooded murders of recent years.

The counsel glanced up at his secretary. They were more than employer and employed; for family and other reasons, they were friends. 'Ah, I remember; yes,' he said with a kind smile, 'and you want to get away for Christmas? You're going to skate and ski in the Alps, aren't you? If I was your age I'd come with you.' Johnson laughed shortly. He was a young man of twenty-six, with a delicate face like a girl's. 'I can catch the morning boat now,' he said; 'but that's not the reason I'm glad the trial is over. I'm glad it's over because I've seen the last of that man's dreadful face. It positively haunted me. That white skin, with the black hair brushed low over the forehead, is a thing I shall never forget, and the description of the way the dismembered body was crammed and packed with lime into that—' 'Don't dwell on it, my dear fellow,' interrupted the other, looking at him curiously out of his keen eyes, 'don't think about it. Such pictures have a

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*I shall never
forget...the way
the dismembered
body was
crammed and
packed with lime*



trick of coming back when one least wants them.' He paused a moment. 'Now go,' he added presently, 'and enjoy your holiday. I shall want all your energy for my Parliamentary work when you get back. And don't break your neck skiing.' Johnson shook hands and took his leave. At the door he turned suddenly.

'I knew there was something I wanted to ask you,'

he said. 'Would you mind lending me one of your kit-bags? It's too late to get one tonight, and I leave in the morning before the shops are open.'

'Of course; I'll send Henry over with it to your rooms. You shall have it the moment I get home.'

'I promise to take great care of it,' said Johnson gratefully, delighted to think that within thirty hours he would be nearing the brilliant sunshine of the high Alps in winter. Be thought of that criminal court was like an evil dream in his mind.

He dined at his club and went on to Bloomsbury, where he occupied the top floor in one of those old, gaunt houses in which the rooms are large and lofty. The floor below his own was vacant and unfurnished, and below that were other lodgers whom he did not know. It was cheerless, and he looked forward heartily to a change. The night was even more cheerless: it was miserable, and few people were about. A cold, sleety rain was driving down the streets before the keenest east wind he had ever felt. It howled dismally among the big, gloomy houses of the great squares, and when he reached his rooms he heard it whistling and shouting over the world of black roofs beyond his windows.

In the hall he met his landlady, shading a candle from the draughts with her thin hand. 'This come by a man from Mr Wilbrim's, sir.' She pointed to what was evidently the kit-bag, and Johnson thanked her and took it upstairs with him. 'I shall be going abroad in the morning for ten days, Mrs Monks,' he said. 'I'll leave an address for letters.' 'And I hope you'll 'ave a merry Christmas, sir,' she said, in a raucous, wheezy voice that suggested spirits, 'and better weather than this.' 'I hope so too,' replied her lodger, shuddering a little as the wind went roaring down the street outside

When he got upstairs he heard the sleet volleying against the window panes. He put his kettle on to make a cup of hot coffee, and then set about putting a few things in order for his absence. 'And now I must pack—such as my packing is,' he laughed to himself, and set to work at once.

He liked the packing, for it brought the snow mountains so vividly before him, and made him forget the unpleasant scenes of the past ten days. Besides, it was not elaborate in nature. His friend had lent him the very thing—a stout canvas kit-bag, sackshaped, with holes round the neck for the brass

bar and padlock. It was a bit shapeless, true, and not much to look at, but its capacity was unlimited, and there was no need to pack carefully. He shoved in his waterproof coat, his fur cap and gloves, his skates and climbing boots, his sweaters, snow-boots, and earcaps; and then on the top of these he piled his woollen shirts and underwear, his thick socks, puttees, and knickerbockers. The dress suit came next, in case the hotel people dressed for dinner, and then, thinking of the best way to pack his white shirts, he paused a moment to reflect. 'That's the worst of these kitbags,' he mused vaguely, standing in the centre of the sitting-room, where he had come to fetch some string.

It was after ten o'clock. A furious gust of wind rattled the windows as though to hurry him up, and he thought with pity of the poor Londoners whose Christmas would be spent in such a climate, whilst he was skimming over snowy slopes in bright sunshine, and dancing in the evening with rosy-checked girls— Ah! That reminded him; he must put in his dancing pumps and evening socks. He crossed over from his sitting-room to the cupboard on the landing where he kept his linen.

And as he did so he heard someone coming softly up the stairs.

He stood still a moment on the landing to listen. It was Mrs Monks's step, he thought; she must be coming up with the last post. But then the steps ceased suddenly, and he heard no more. They were at least two flights down, and he came to the conclusion they were too heavy to be those of his bibulous landlady. No doubt they belonged to a late lodger who had mistaken his floor. He went into his bedroom and packed his pumps and dress-shirts as best he could.

The kit-bag by this time was two-thirds full, and stood upright on its own base like a sack of flour. For the first time he noticed that it was old and dirty, the canvas faded and worn, and that it had obviously been subjected to rather rough treatment. It was not a very nice bag to have sent him—certainly not a new one, or one that his chief valued. He gave the matter a passing thought, and went on with his packing. Once or twice, however, he caught himself wondering who it could have been wandering down below, for Mrs Monks had not come up with letters, and the floor was empty and unfurnished. From time to time, moreover, he was almost certain he heard a soft tread of someone padding about over the bare boards— cautiously, stealthily, as silently

as possible—and, further, that the sounds had been lately coming distinctly nearer.

For the first time in his life he began to feel a little creepy. Then, as though to emphasize this feeling, an odd thing happened: as he left the bedroom, having, just packed his recalcitrant white shirts, he noticed that the top of the kit-bag lopped over towards him with an extraordinary resemblance to a human face. The canvas fell into a fold like a nose and forehead, and the brass rings for the padlock just filled the position of the eyes. A shadow—or was it a travel stain? For he could not tell exactly—looked like hair. It gave him rather a turn, for it was so absurdly, so outrageously, like the face of John Turk the murderer.

He laughed, and went into the front room, where the light was stronger.

‘That horrid case has got on my mind,’ he thought; ‘I shall be glad of a change of scene and air.’ In the sitting-room, however, he was not pleased to hear again that stealthy tread upon the stairs, and to realize that it was much closer than before, as well as unmistakably real. And this time he got up and went out to see who it could be creeping about on the upper staircase at so late an hour.

But the sound ceased; there was no one visible on the stairs. He went to the floor below, not without trepidation, and turned on the electric light to make sure that no one was hiding in the empty rooms of the unoccupied suite. There was not a stick of furniture large enough to hide a dog. Then he called over the banisters to Mrs Monks, but there was no answer, and his voice echoed down into the dark vault of the house, and was lost in the roar of the gale that howled outside. Everyone was in bed and asleep —everyone except himself and the owner of this soft and stealthy tread.

‘My absurd imagination, I suppose,’ he thought. ‘It must have been the wind after all, although—it seemed so very real and close, I thought.’ He went back to his packing. It was by this time getting on towards midnight. He drank his coffee up and lit another pipe—the last before turning in.

It is difficult to say exactly at what point fear begins, when the causes of that fear are not plainly before the eyes. Impressions gather on the surface of the mind, film by film, as ice gathers upon the surface of still water, but often so lightly that they claim no definite recognition from the

consciousness. Then a point is reached where the accumulated impressions become a definite emotion, and the mind realizes that something has happened. With something of a start, Johnson suddenly recognized that he felt nervous—oddly nervous; also, that for some time past the causes of this feeling had been gathering slowly in his mind, but that he had only just reached the point where he was forced to acknowledge them.

It was a singular and curious malaise that had come over him, and he hardly knew what to make of it. He felt as though he were doing something that was strongly objected to by another person, another person, moreover, who had some right to object. It was a most disturbing and disagreeable feeling, not unlike the persistent promptings of conscience: almost, in fact, as if he were doing something he knew to be wrong. Yet, though he searched vigorously and honestly in his mind, he could nowhere lay his finger upon the secret of this growing uneasiness, and it perplexed him. More, it distressed and frightened him.

‘Pure nerves, I suppose,’ he said aloud with a forced laugh. ‘Mountain air will cure all that! Ah,’ he added, still speaking to himself, ‘and that reminds me —my snow-glasses.’ He was standing by the door of the bedroom during this brief soliloquy, and as he passed quickly towards the sitting-room to fetch them from the cupboard he saw out of the corner of his eye the indistinct outline of a figure standing on the stairs, a few feet from the top. It was someone in a stooping position, with one hand on the banisters, and the face peering up towards the landing. And at the same moment he heard a shuffling footstep. The person who had been creeping about below all this time had at last come up to his own floor. Who in the world could it be? And what in the name of Heaven did he want? Johnson caught his breath sharply and stood stock still. Then, after a few seconds’ hesitation, he found his courage, and turned to investigate.

The stairs, he saw to his utter amazement, were empty; there was no one.

He felt a series of cold shivers run over him, and something about the muscles of his legs gave a little and grew weak. For the space of several minutes he peered steadily into the shadows that congregated about the top of the staircase where he had seen the figure, and then he walked fast—almost ran, in fact— into the light of the front room; but hardly had he passed inside the doorway when he heard

someone come up the stairs behind him with a quick bound and go swiftly into his bedroom. It was a heavy, but at the same time a stealthy footstep—the tread of somebody who did not wish to be seen. And it was at this precise moment that the nervousness he had hitherto experienced leaped the boundary line, and entered the state of fear, almost of acute, unreasoning fear. Before it turned into terror there was a further boundary to cross, and beyond that again lay the region of pure horror. Johnson's position was an unenviable one.

By Jove! That was someone on the stairs, then,' he muttered, his flesh crawling all over; 'and whoever it was has now gone into my bedroom.' His delicate, pale face turned absolutely white, and for some minutes he hardly knew what to think or do. Then he realized intuitively that delay only set a premium upon fear; and he crossed the landing boldly and went straight into the other room, where, a few seconds before, the steps had disappeared.

'Who's there? Is that you, Mrs Monks?' he called aloud, as he went, and heard the first half of his words echo down the empty stairs, while the second half fell dead against the curtains in a room that apparently held no other human figure than his own.

'Who's there?' he called again, in a voice unnecessarily loud and that only just held firm. 'What do you want here?' The curtains swayed very slightly, and, as he saw it, his heart felt as if it almost missed a beat; yet he dashed forward and drew them aside with a rush. A window, streaming with rain, was all that met his gaze. He continued his search, but in vain; the cupboards held nothing but rows of clothes, hanging motionless; and under the bed there was no sign of anyone hiding. He stepped backwards into the middle of the room, and, as he did so, something all but tripped him up. Turning with a sudden spring of alarm he saw—the kit-bag.

'Odd!' he thought. 'That's not where I left it!' A few moments before it had surely been on his right, between the bed and the bath; he did not remember having moved it. It was very curious. What in the world was the matter with everything? Were all his senses gone queer? A terrific gust of wind tore at the windows, dashing the sleet against the glass with the force of small gunshot, and then fled away howling dismally over the waste of Bloomsbury roofs. A sudden vision of the Channel next day rose in his mind and recalled him sharply to realities.

There's no one here at any rate; that's quite clear!' he exclaimed aloud.

Yet at the time he uttered them he knew perfectly well that his words were not true and that he did not believe them himself. He felt exactly as though someone was hiding close about him, watching all his movements, trying to hinder his packing in some way. 'And two of my senses,' he added, keeping up the pretence, 'have played me the most absurd tricks: the steps I heard and the figure I saw were both entirely imaginary.' He went back to the front room, poked the fire into a blaze, and sat down before it to think. What impressed him more than anything else was the fact that the kit-bag was no longer where he had left it. It had been dragged nearer to the door.

What happened afterwards that night happened, of course, to a man already excited by fear, and was perceived by a man that had not the full and proper control, therefore, of the senses. Outwardly, Johnson remained calm and master of himself to the end, pretending to the very last that everything he witnessed had a natural explanation, or was merely delusions of his tired nerves. But inwardly, in his very heart, he knew all along that someone had been hiding downstairs in the empty suite when he came in, that this person had watched his opportunity and then stealthily made his way up to the bedroom, and that all he saw and heard afterwards, from the moving of the kit-bag to—well, to the other things this story has to tell—were caused directly by the presence of this invisible person.

And it was here, just when he most desired to keep his mind and thoughts controlled, that the vivid pictures received day after day upon the mental plates exposed in the courtroom of the Old Bailey, came strongly to light and developed themselves in the dark room of his inner vision.

Unpleasant, haunting memories have a way of coming to life again just when the mind least desires them—in the silent watches of the night, on sleepless pillows, during the lonely hours spent by sick and dying beds.

And so now, in the same way, Johnson saw nothing but the dreadful face of John Turk, the murderer, lowering at him from every corner of his mental field of vision; the white skin, the evil eyes, and the fringe of black hair low over the forehead. All the pictures of those ten days in court crowded back into his mind unbidden, and very vivid.

‘This is all rubbish and nerves,’ he exclaimed at length, springing with sudden energy from his chair. ‘I shall finish my packing and go to bed.

I’m overwrought, overtired. No doubt, at this rate I shall hear steps and things all night!’

But his face was deadly white all the same. He snatched up his field-glasses and walked across to the bedroom, humming a music-hall song as he went—a trifle too loud to be natural; and the instant he crossed the threshold and stood within the room something turned cold about his heart, and he felt that every hair on his head stood up.

The kit-bag lay close in front of him, several feet nearer to the door than he had left it, and just over its crumpled top he saw a head and face slowly sinking down out of sight as though someone were crouching behind it to hide, and at the same moment a sound like a long-drawn sigh was distinctly audible in the still air about him between the gusts of the storm outside.

Johnson had more courage and will-power than the girlish indecision of his face indicated; but at first such a wave of terror came over him that for some seconds he could do nothing but stand and stare. A violent trembling ran down his back and legs, and he was conscious of a foolish, almost a hysterical, impulse to scream aloud. That sigh seemed in his very ear, and the air still quivered with it. It was unmistakably a human sigh.

‘Who’s there?’ he said at length, finding his voice; but thought he meant to speak with loud decision, the tones came out instead in a faint whisper, for he had partly lost the control of his tongue and lips.

He stepped forward, so that he could see all round and over the kit-bag.

Of course there was nothing there, nothing but the faded carpet and the bulgang canvas sides. He put out his hands and threw open the mouth of the sack where it had fallen over, being only three parts full, and then he saw for the first time that round the inside, some six inches from the top, there ran a broad smear of dull crimson. It was an old and faded blood stain. He uttered a scream, and drew back his hands as if they had been burnt. At the same moment the kit-bag gave a faint, but unmistakable, lurch forward towards the door.

Johnson collapsed backwards, searching with his hands for the support of something solid, and the door, being further behind him than he realized, received his weight just in time to prevent his falling, and shut to with a resounding bang. At the same moment the swinging of his left arm accidentally touched the electric switch, and the light in the room went out.

It was an awkward and disagreeable predicament, and if Johnson had not been possessed of real pluck he might have done all manner of foolish things. As it was, however, he pulled himself together, and groped furiously for the little brass knob to turn the light on again. But the rapid closing of the door had set the coats hanging on it a-swinging, and his fingers became entangled in a confusion of sleeves and pockets, so that it was some moments before he found the switch. And in those few moments of bewilderment and terror two things happened that sent him beyond recall over the boundary into the region of genuine horror—he distinctly heard the kit-bag shuffling heavily across the floor in jerks, and close in front of his face sounded once again the sigh of a human being.

In his anguished efforts to find the brass button on the wall he nearly scraped the nails from his fingers, but even then, in those frenzied moments of alarm—so swift and alert are the impressions of a man keyed-up by a vivid emotion—he had time to realize that he dreaded the return of the light, and that it might be better for him to stay hidden in the merciful screen of darkness. It was but the impulse of a moment, however, and before he had time to act upon it he had yielded automatically to the original desire, and the room was flooded again with light.

But the second instinct had been right. It would have been better for him to have stayed in the shelter of the kind darkness. For there, close before him, bending over the half-packed kit-bag, clear as life in the merciless glare of the electric light, stood the figure of John Turk, the murderer. Not three feet from him the man stood, the fringe of black hair marked plainly against the pallor of the forehead, the whole horrible presentment of the scoundrel, as vivid as he had seen him day after day in the Old Bailey, when he stood there in the dock, cynical and callous, under the very shadow of the gallows.

In a flash Johnson realized what it all meant: the dirty and much-used bag; the smear of crimson within the top; the dreadful stretched condition of the bulging sides. He

remembered how the victim's body had been stuffed into a canvas bag for burial, the ghastly, dismembered fragments forced with lime into this very bag; and the bag itself produced as evidence—it all came back to him as clear as day...

Very softly and stealthily his hand groped behind him for the handle of the door, but before he could actually turn it the very thing that he most of all dreaded came about, and John Turk lifted his devil's face and looked at him. At the same moment that heavy sigh passed through the air of the room, formulated somehow into words: It's my bag. And I want it.' Johnson just remembered clawing the door open, and then falling in a heap upon the floor of the landing, as he tried frantically to make his way into the front room.

He remained unconscious for a long time, and it was still dark when he opened his eyes and realized that he was lying, stiff and bruised, on the cold boards. Then the memory of what he had seen rushed back into his mind, and he promptly fainted again. When he woke the second time the wintry dawn was just beginning to peep in at the windows, painting the stairs a cheerless, dismal grey, and he managed to crawl into the front room, and cover himself with an overcoat in the armchair, where at length he fell asleep.

A great clamour woke him. He recognized Mrs Monks's voice, loud and voluble.

'What! You ain't been to bed, sir! Are you ill, or has anything 'appened? And there's an urgent gentleman to see you, though it ain't seven o'clock yet, and —'

'Who is it?' he stammered. 'I'm all right, thanks. Fell asleep in my chair, I suppose.'

'Someone from Mr Wilb'rim's, and he says he ought to see you quick before you go abroad, and I told him—'

'Show him up, please, at once,' said Johnson, whose head was whirling, and his mind was still full of dreadful visions.

Mr Wilbraham's man came in with many apologies, and explained briefly and quickly that an absurd mistake had been made, and that the wrong kit-bag had been sent over the night before.

'Henry somehow got hold of the one that came over from the courtroom, and Mr Wilbraham only discovered it when he

saw his own lying in his room, and asked why it had not gone to you,' the man said.

'Oh!' said Johnson stupidly.

'And he must have brought you the one from the murder case instead, sir, I'm afraid,' the man continued, without the ghost of an expression on his face. 'The one John Turk packed the dead both in. Mr Wilbraham's awful upset about it, sir, and told me to come over first thing this morning with the right one, as you were leaving by the boat.' He pointed to a clean-looking kit-bag on the floor, which he had just brought. 'And I was to bring the other one back, sir,' he added casually.

For some minutes Johnson could not find his voice. At last he pointed in the direction of his bedroom. 'Perhaps you would kindly unpack it for me. Just empty the things out on the floor.' The man disappeared into the other room, and was gone for five minutes.

Johnson heard the shifting to and fro of the bag, and the rattle of the skates and boots being unpacked.

'Thank you, sir,' the man said, returning with the bag folded over his arm. 'And can I do anything more to help you, sir?' 'What is it?' asked Johnson, seeing that he still had something he wished to say.

The man shuffled and looked mysterious. 'Beg pardon, sir, but knowing your interest in the Turk case, I thought you'd maybe like to know what's happened—'

'Yes.'

'John Turk killed hisself last night with poison immediately on getting his release, and he left a note for Mr Wilbraham saying as he'd be much obliged if they'd have him put away, same as the woman he murdered, in the old kit-hag.'

'What time—did he do it?' asked Johnson.

'Ten o'clock last night, sir, the warder says.'